

THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

# FORUM

Volume 2, Number 4

April, 1989

## Gorbachev and the Military: A Revolution in Security Policy, Too?

by Condoleezza Rice

"It is evident that force and the threat of force can no longer be, and should not be, instruments of foreign policy.... It is clear today that the increase of military force does not make any single power all-powerful. Moreover, a one-sided emphasis on military force, in the final analysis, weakens the other elements of national security."<sup>1</sup>

Statements like the one above are not unusual from Soviet leaders. Usually at times of internal weakness, the Soviets have launched peace campaigns and devalued, at least rhetorically, the use of force and military power. While doing so in words, the reality of Soviet military policy has been quite different. The Soviet Union is a garrison state, possessing enormous military forces acquired at great economic and social cost. Whatever the value of cooperation and short term accommodation to the interests of other states, the Soviet Union has relied on extraordinary military might for security at home and as the primary instrument of policy abroad.

Yet a review of Gorbachev's four-year reign reveals changes — some subtle and others dramatic — that suggest revision of many long-held premises of Soviet security policy. Does this finally portend a narrowing of the distance between the rhetoric of peace and preparation for war?

Dissatisfaction with the state of military policy actually predates Gorbachev. Already at the start of the 1980s, Soviet marshals wondered aloud whether the creaking Soviet economy could meet the needs of the 21st century battlefield. But the catalyst for the outpouring of criticism in the Soviet press of military policy characteristic of the Gorbachev era was the recognition, albeit belated, of the overwhelming costs of the policies of the past. The suggested revisions of policy are more far-reaching than at any other

time in Soviet history. What is the logic of the "new thinking" in security policy? While the impact and duration of the Gorbachev security policy are still unclear, it is possible to discuss two aspects of the policy with some certainty. First, the "new thinking" is very obviously a rejection of the Brezhnev line. Leonid Brezhnev is being criticized for fundamental mistakes, not for tactical errors. The old foreign policy is deemed to have been economically expensive and politically disastrous. Understanding how fundamentally flawed that policy was is one of the best ways to understand how Gorbachev viewed Soviet options when he came to power.

Second, the new thinking is beginning to have an impact on the direction of the Soviet military. The Soviet armed forces are clearly caught in the maelstrom accompanying *perestroika*. There is no historical parallel for today's public criticism of the Soviet military as bloated, expensive and even morally corrupt. The pace and virulence of the attacks have intensified; criticism is now leveled against the military from within as well as from without. Some have even begun to question the need for a huge standing army.<sup>2</sup> They are asking, quite reasonably, "What becomes of the armed forces if 'force and the threat of force' are valued less in Soviet foreign policy?"

Understanding the implications of the new security policy for Soviet military power is a very complex task. This is a time of a lively debate in the Soviet press on many aspects of military policy. Separating debate from actual policy is almost impossible. And many of the quite radical ideas presented will never come to fruition. There can be no doubt that if the Soviets are to meet the demands of economic

1 Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, "Address to the United Nations," reported in *Pravda*, December 8, 1988.

2 Discussed in a roundtable sponsored by and reported in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, June 29, 1988.



THE W. AVERELL HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY OF THE SOVIET UNION  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY • 420 West 118th Street • 12th Floor • New York, New York 10027

## The Harriman Institute Forum

and political reform, Soviet military policy will have to change. The Soviet political process is one in which old institutional arrangements and new realities are brought into imperfect harmony. This is the course on which the Soviet military and the Communist Party are now engaged.

### Building Up, Muddling Down

Any discussion of *perestroika* in the armed forces begins with the economic costs of the Soviet military buildup of the last twenty years. The Soviets themselves now admit that their economy has been stretched to the limit by a buildup that cost perhaps as much as 25% of the GNP. The stagnant economy, outmoded productive facilities and a weak technological base are due in part to the distortion of the Soviet economy to serve military needs first, overall economic growth second and the consumer as an afterthought. The Soviet economy was best at supporting military needs.

But increasingly, at the end of the 1970s, Soviet military men argued that the economy was ill-prepared for the military-technical challenges that lay ahead. Soviet marshals, most notably then Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Ogarkov, were concerned that the weak technological base of the economy would be unable to produce increasingly sophisticated weaponry for the future. He spoke of a "new revolution in military affairs" in which breakthroughs in microelectronics would make conventional weapons almost as lethal as small nuclear ones.<sup>3</sup> The military envisioned computers performing massive calculations that gave the commander real time information and intelligence, and allowed extremely rapid decision-making on the battlefield. Ogarkov's message was clear: advances in high technology threatened to make the twenty- year Soviet military buildup obsolete.

This, in part, explains the Soviet reaction to President Reagan's speech in March, 1983, challenging the American scientific community to mobilize and create a defensive shield against nuclear weapons. Though many noted scientists dismissed the "space shield" as infeasible, Soviet marshals focused instead on the offensive potential of laser technology and the development of super-computing that would allow effective battle-management. The specter of a mobilized American, West European and Japanese effort to achieve a high-technology goal brought Soviet concerns into sharp relief. The new challenge was not to meet a breakthrough in a single technology, like the A-bomb, but to

stay abreast of the rapidly expanding technological base of the coalition of enemies that the Soviets faced.<sup>4</sup>

Ogarkov's prescription was to increase resources directed to the defense sector, especially for military research and development.<sup>5</sup> His view apparently rejected, Ogarkov was dismissed in September 1984 when Konstantin Chernenko was General Secretary. Soviet military men began to articulate the view that obtains to the present day: The high technology problems of defense can only be solved within the framework of the recovery of the Soviet economy as a whole.

The problem for the military is that economic recovery will not be achieved quickly. Moreover, a number of expensive resource allocation decisions which were made at least ten years ago are now inescapable. Soviet military forces were recently modernized. Deployment of an entire new generation of nuclear and conventional forces is underway. These developments represent "sunk costs."<sup>6</sup>

The next round of modernization, for which resource allocation decisions should be made now, may be in jeopardy. If, as appears likely, the Soviets devote resources to the base of the economy and to light industry, defense accounts will suffer. The Soviet military has in the past enjoyed priority for scarce materials and for skilled labor. As the Soviets strive for more balanced growth, that priority may fade. In short, the military's hopes that the redirection of resources from the defense sector would be short-term are probably fading. They may have to do with less for a long time to come.

### Brezhnev's Mistakes

Constrained resources are not the only problem facing the Soviet military. A shortfall in resources, whatever its duration, can be weathered. The rationale for the new security policy is not just economic. The role of military force in modern statecraft is being questioned, not only because the arms race is costly but because Brezhnev's foreign policy, so dependent on military power, is viewed widely as a miserable failure.

Brezhnev has, like Stalin, become a foil for all that is wrong with the Soviet system. Criticism of him should be examined in this vein. Still, when the Kremlin leadership viewed the state of Soviet foreign policy in 1985, their alarm at the mismatch between Soviet military power and Soviet influence in the world was probably genuine. The "new security policy" is incomprehensible without understanding

3 Ogarkov wrote a number of articles on this theme. See, for instance, *Istoriia uchit bditel'nosti* (*History Teaches Vigilance*) (Moscow: Voennoe izdatel'stvo, 1985).

4 First Deputy Minister of Defense and Chief of the General Staff Akhromeev discussed the SDI issue in detail in an interview published in *Krasnaia zvezda*, September 9, 1983.

5 See Abraham S. Becker, *Ogarkov's Complaint and Gorbachev's Dilemma* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1987).

6 This trend was noted in a report prepared for the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, "Allocation of Resources in the Soviet Union and China — 1986," (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988).

that it is first and foremost a rejection of badly flawed policies of the past.

The 1970s were heady years for the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev had been the ultimate gamesman, but his bravado and brinksmanship belied relative Soviet military weakness. That weakness was exposed in the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of many mistakes that Khrushchev made, and his successors set out resolutely to construct balanced military forces that would be second to none. At the end of the 1960s, that goal was achieved. The Soviet Union was recognized as a superpower and as the military equal of the United States. The Soviet Union's flag was displayed far from the Eurasian land mass as Soviet military tutors trained revolutionary armies in the Third World and Soviet generals directed operations in Angola and Ethiopia. Finally, in December 1979, the Soviet armed forces invaded Afghanistan to prop up a failing revolutionary ally.

Had the Brezhnev years come to an end in 1979 they might have been deemed successful. By the time of his death in 1982, the golden years of Soviet foreign policy were tarnished. The Soviet Union faced challenges on a number of fronts. Over 100,000 Soviet soldiers were mired in the war in Afghanistan, a campaign that most had expected to be an easy police action. That war, and the perception of unchecked growth of Soviet influence, mobilized world opinion toward Ronald Reagan's view of the Soviet threat. The USSR thus faced a resurgent America with a leadership dedicated to an enormous buildup of American military force and determined to challenge Soviet power in the Third World. Given the General Staff's admonitions about the even tougher challenge of the next round of the arms race, the Soviet economy faced an enormous and perhaps unwinnable challenge.

And what were the rewards of the Brezhnev foreign policy? The Soviets achieved recognition as a superpower. They were respected — even feared — for their military power. Paradoxically, that power proved to be something of a weakness. The Soviets were able to help several revolutionary movements take control and found clients among other struggling, anti-Western states. But in surveying the international system, the Soviets counted most of their friends among the weak and weakening. Ties with states like Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Vietnam and North Korea were hardly substitutes for relations with Japan, China and the newly industrializing countries of Asia and the ASEAN bloc. Soviet military support for these "pariah" states contributed to their inability to improve relations with more important countries.<sup>7</sup>

## Making Enemies

Soviet military power was dual-edged in other ways as well. Throughout the 1970s the Soviets were caught in a peculiar spiral. Believing that détente was a response to Soviet strength, they mistakenly calculated that the stronger they became, the more responsive to Soviet interests other states would be.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Soviets were becoming so strong that they produced only fear and resentment. That in turn fueled Soviet fears of encirclement, leading them to brandish their military power, deepening suspicion and hatred of the Soviet Union.

Here the case of Soviet-Japanese relations is particularly instructive. At the end of the 1970s, relations between Tokyo and Moscow improved, resulting in a number of trade and economic assistance agreements. These were important victories for the Soviets, who wished to tap Japanese technology for the development of Siberia and the Soviet Far East.

But the Japanese were seeking better relations with China as well. The Soviets were alarmed at the prospect of "encirclement" by an alliance of America, Japan and China. Clearly overreacting, the Soviets began to press the Japanese and to build up their military forces in the Far East in accordance with a review of Soviet military requirements worldwide. One of the elements of that buildup was the deployment of Soviet ground forces and air power on two of the islands that the Japanese still claim as their own.<sup>9</sup> The decision to "militarize" the islands, coupled with Soviet rhetoric and a propensity for parading Soviet naval forces off the coasts of Japan, led to a backlash. Japan renewed its commitment to the defense pact with the United States, increased defense spending and allowed the Japanese military to take on more extensive roles in the defense of the sea-lanes.

The Chinese, concerned about the buildup of Soviet military power, entered into closer cooperation with the United States. And the Reagan administration, convinced that the enemy of an enemy is a friend, overcame commitments to Taiwan to permit the transfer of sophisticated military technology to China. The Soviets brought about exactly the situation that they had sought to discourage. Cooperation among the other Asian powers was caused almost exclusively by their shared anti-Soviet sentiment.

The situation in Europe was less dramatic but no less troubling. East-Central Europe is the heart of the Soviet security system. It is an important ideological and security buffer for the Soviet Union. Because the Soviets control Eastern Europe both by dominating the politics of the region

7 The mismatch is noted in a statement by B. P. Lukin, Deputy Chief of the Foreign Ministry's Directorate for Countries of the Pacific Ocean and Southeast Asia. *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'* (International Life) July, 1988.

8 Viacheslav Dashichev, a Soviet historian, noted this in "Vostok-zapad: poisk novykh otnoshenii," (East-West: the Search for New Relations), *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 18, 1988.

9 The report of the Northern Territories Issue Association, "A Border Yet Unresolved" (Tokyo, 1981), is one example among many statements of the Japanese case.

and by maintaining armed forces there, they can feel certain that the territory of the U.S.S.R. is secure and convince themselves that they extend that protection to strong, if sometimes recalcitrant, socialist allies.

In support of these goals, the Soviets have strategically placed their most sophisticated and battle-ready military units on East-Central European soil. Soviet forces are postured for a rapid offensive into the heart of Western Europe. Discussions of military strategy leave little doubt that the offensive is the preferred method of waging war, should it come.

A secondary but increasingly important political goal is the establishment of cordial and productive relations with Western Europe. The Soviets have sought beneficial economic ties with the states of Western Europe, relations that have been even more critical for the development of weak economies of the smaller states of the Eastern bloc. To the degree that they can, the Soviets have encouraged the West Europeans to distance themselves from the United States and to join in a "European" détente. But the forces deployed in support of Soviet security goals have become an extraordinary irritant in their political relations with Western Europe.

## Offensive Strategy, Defensive Intent?

The Soviets have always stressed their benign political intent when discussing political-military doctrine.<sup>10</sup> But their military strategy and force structure stressed the primacy of offensive operations. Not surprisingly, this rather tortured formulation played badly in Europe. NATO had to respond to Soviet capabilities, not their declared intentions. The Soviets might have argued that their offensive strategy would come into play only in the event of a war that they would not cause. But since the offensive strategy depended heavily on delivering the first blow against NATO, the Western community found it hard to accept this rationale.

In the 1970s, the Soviet General Staff began to wonder if the Soviet Union was not too dependent on nuclear weapons as the basis of military strategy. The assumption governing Soviet strategy had been that any war would eventually be nuclear and probably very short. But the military began to recognize a self-interest in trying to keep any conflict at a conventional level for as long as possible. They hoped, if possible, to avoid escalation to a nuclear exchange in order to reduce the destruction the Soviet Union would experience. So the army generals who dominated the General Staff began to develop a strategy that gradually

devalued nuclear weapons, arguing that there might be an extended conventional phase at the outset of the war.<sup>11</sup>

The Soviets made improvements to their air power, the mobility of their heavy armored forces and to their command and control system in preparation for a longer conventional phase of the war. By the end of the 1970s, some military scientists (as the Soviets call their analysts) were even proposing a "conventional option," in which nuclear weapons would never be used.<sup>12</sup> The frightening fact for NATO was that some Soviet marshals seemed to believe that avoidance of the nuclear threshold was in Soviet hands. Continued improvements in Soviet forces — creating the potential for rapid action in a crisis to destroy Western nuclear forces pre-emptively — were key. This was a real challenge to NATO doctrine which was premised on the threat to use graduated nuclear forces (from battlefield weapons up to strategic forces) in response to a Soviet conventional attack.<sup>13</sup>

To be fair, the conventional offensive had many detractors in the Soviet military.<sup>14</sup> The logic of the conventional offensive was a strange one. It required the proponent to suspend belief in nuclear escalation and accept the proposition that NATO would accept defeat rather than use whatever remaining nuclear capability it had to punish the Soviet Union. A Soviet leader adopting the conventional option also had to believe that the United States, fearing retaliation, would fail to use strategic forces against the Soviet Union.

The threat of nuclear escalation alone might have been enough to discredit the conventional option. But NATO began to make improvements that raised doubts about the viability of the Soviet rapid offensive, whatever the prospect for the use of nuclear forces. Faced with improving Soviet conventional capabilities, American and NATO strategists made doctrinal adjustments that would mean aggressively seeking and destroying Warsaw Pact forces as they mobilized deep in Soviet territory. This strategy of destroying the "second echelon" (forces mobilizing to support the initial Soviet rapid thrust into Europe) was extremely threatening to the potential success of the offensive. By 1984, articles were appearing in the Soviet military press that clearly showed concern and talked about defending against NATO's potential for "deep interdiction" against the second echelon.

The Soviet General Staff felt the threat even more acutely because the NATO strategy rested heavily on employing sophisticated new technologies, such as "smart weapons" steered by computers. Much of Marshal Ogarkov's alarm at the USSR's failure to keep abreast of the

10 V. G. Kulikov, *Doktrina zashchity mira i sotsializma: O voennoi doktrine gosudarstv-uchastnikov Varshavskogo Dogovora* (Doctrine in defense of peace and socialism: Concerning the military doctrine of the members of the Warsaw Pact) (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1988).

11 M.A. Gareev, *Frunze: voennyi teoretik* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1985).

12 Ibid.

13 See William Odom's excellent explication of the doctrinal debate in "Soviet Military Doctrine," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1988/89.

14 Even Gareev found it necessary to admit that "the imperialists might unleash their nuclear weapons." Ibid.

West in weapons development stemmed from his view of this Western strategy of "AirLand Battle," as a broadside technological challenge to Soviet military capability.

The Soviets now faced a real military problem in Europe. Their rapid offensive, always a source of political tension, was being challenged militarily. Though NATO has failed to deliver most of the new technologies to the field, the Soviet General Staff reacted at the time to the potential damage that the new strategy could do.

The political situation in Europe was deteriorating as well. In 1979, NATO adopted the "two-track" decision which threatened to deploy new theater range nuclear forces (Pershing II and Ground Launched Cruise Missiles) unless the Soviet Union withdrew and dismantled the SS-20s. The Soviets were adamant that the SS-20 was simply a modernization of the SS-4 and SS-5 and negotiations were fruitless. When the United States demanded that the Soviets would have to destroy their SS-20 force (the so-called zero option) it appeared that successful negotiations were unlikely.

The Soviets then launched a campaign to erode the solidarity of the Western alliance. The plan to deploy the INF forces did provoke peace demonstrations throughout Western Europe and the issue threatened to bring down conservative governments in the Netherlands and Germany. But in the end, those governments survived and deployment of the missiles began on schedule in December 1983. The Soviets walked out of the talks and later abandoned the discussions on strategic forces as well. Western public opinion focused on the Soviet walkout, not on the reasons for it. The Soviets, thus bearing the onus for the breakdown in arms control, sent Andrei Gromyko to Washington to propose resumption of the talks in 1984.

By coincidence, the second round of the new talks was set to begin on the morning of Konstantin Chernenko's death. The passing, at last, of Brezhnev's geriatric successors and the rise of Gorbachev portended major shifts in Soviet arms control policy.

Nonetheless, the point should not be lost that the policy of "hanging tough" in arms control, characterized by the walkout in 1983, was abandoned before Gorbachev came to power. When Gorbachev took office in March 1985, he faced in this area, as in many others, limited options in dealing with an American administration that was in no hurry to conclude an arms control agreement.

## The New Security Policy

This trail of discredited and ineffective politico-military policies under Brezhnev explains, in part, the appeal of the "new security policy." Under Brezhnev, the Soviets were

alarmed by the very coalitions that they helped to create, and looked to deploy military forces "strong enough to defeat the combined power of any potential combination of enemies." The dying Brezhnev and his two transitional successors, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, adopted a hard line and tried to stay the course. Gorbachev, on entering office, faced skyrocketing military requirements to continue this approach. Because he decided to abandon it, the "new foreign policy" should be seen as having a strong political logic that is as compelling as economic concerns.

In order to get control of Soviet foreign policy, Gorbachev must break the vicious cycle of spiraling fear of encirclement and ever-increasing military requirements. Soviet military policy must somehow be made to proceed from a new logic. It must be robust enough to give the Soviets clout in the world but not so overt and threatening as to produce the reaction that it did in the 1970s. If they are to succeed, the way in which the Soviets conceive their military requirements must change.

They are beginning to try to find that balance. Critics of the old security policy make clear that the key is to avoid the mistake of allowing narrowly military concerns to dominate a broad political-military strategy. To date, the new security policy has had its greatest effect on Soviet arms control policy. Acceptance of the "zero option" for intermediate range nuclear forces is instructive in this regard. The "zero option" required the Soviets to dismantle about four warheads to each American one. But the assessment of the leadership was that Soviet security goals, in this case, would be best served by an asymmetric agreement.

Slowly, the logic of the "new security policy" is beginning to inform the direction of Soviet military policy in two perceptible ways. First, Soviet military strategy is apparently being reviewed; the core of the new approach is the belief that the offensive character of Soviet strategy, whatever its military value, has been politically disastrous. This has given rise to discussion of "defensive defense." Second, economic and political pressures are combining to force consideration of smaller, though perhaps technologically more sophisticated, military forces.

The review of Soviet military strategy is both interesting and complicated. The primacy of offensive operations has been at the heart of Soviet military thinking since the mid-1930s.

Soviet military journals have been devoting greater attention to defensive operations for several years. Soviet military men were reconsidering the importance of defensive operations *within the context of offensive strategy*, however.<sup>15</sup> As noted above, the Soviets always fell back on their

<sup>15</sup> See for instance M.M.Kozlov, "Osobennosti strategicheskoi oborony i kontranastupleniiia i ikh znacheniiie dlia razvitiia sovetskogo voennogo iskusstva," *Voenno-istoricheskiy zhurnal*, No. 10 (1981).

## The Harriman Institute Forum

"defensive" political intentions to make a claim that their heavy offensive potential should not be feared.

There are two rhetorical innovations of the Gorbachev era. First, the Soviets now state that defense is the primary means of waging war. They have also virtually dropped the tortured separation between political intention and military capability and claim that they now wish to bring the two into harmony.<sup>16</sup>

The next problem is what to do about it. The Soviet leadership says that it is not enough to call their strategy defensive. But it is very difficult to construct forces that are undeniably defensive. This is especially true because the Soviet military, which still dominates the formulation of Soviet military strategy, insists that defense and offense cannot be completely delinked.

Purely defensive forces, constructed to hold territory statically and reinforced with fortifications (reminiscent of the Maginot Line) are decidedly unpopular with professional militaries. The Soviet military has argued that to defend statically (trying simply to hold territory) is certain death. Military forces must be mobile and able to maneuver and encircle enemy forces. If nothing else, once an engagement begins, military forces must be able to stabilize the lines of defense and then to take territory on the counteroffensive.<sup>17</sup> This view was also expressed by General N.V. Chervov, Chief of the General Staff's Arms Control Directorate, in conversations in Moscow, April 1988. The contradiction is that the forces capable of launching a counteroffensive have, by definition, offensive characteristics. Once purely passive defense is ruled out, the line between offense and defense blurs.

The Soviets have been trying to grapple with the problem and are discussing several interesting formulations. One, having to do with length of engagement, suggests that there would be a prolonged defensive phase during which political discussions for war termination would take place. That having failed, the Soviet military would be free to go over to the offensive. The problem is that the force structure would have to include offensive forces and the capabilities would send ambiguous signals.

There is another way in which the Soviets could give meaning to "defensive strategy." One aspect of Soviet military strategy that has always been troubling is its focus on surprise and rapidity of offensive operations. This has led to fears in the West that the Soviets would seek, in a crisis, to launch an offensive under cover of exercises and to advance so rapidly that NATO would be disorganized and unable to respond. In reality, the Soviets would have great difficulty in carrying out this extremely demanding strategy. But to the degree that this scenario concerns the West, the

Soviets could concentrate not on reducing offensive potential per se, but on decreasing the potential for a "surprise attack" and the rapid offensive (a Soviet blitzkrieg) into Europe.

The Soviets have tried to send signals that they are serious about revisions of strategy. In the Far East, for instance, they apparently refrained from aerial training maneuvers on the Chinese border throughout 1988.<sup>18</sup> But such a signal, while politically important, does not diminish Soviet military capability. On the other hand, Soviet willingness to agree through arms control to restrictions on military training and operations could have an impact over the long term. For example, agreements signed in the context of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) require notification of exercises and allow inspectors at troop mobilization and staging areas. While confidence-building measures (CBMs), as they are called, cannot remove the possibility of surprise attack, the ability to observe maneuvers and learn about military operations is useful and probably makes secrecy and surprise more difficult. If nothing else, NATO will learn enough about normal military operations to be able to identify suspicious deviations from the norm.

Gorbachev's speech to the United Nations and offer to cut Soviet forces unilaterally by 10% was interesting in this regard. The importance of the measures proposed lay not in the numbers to be cut but in the suggestion that tank divisions and offensive forces (paratroopers and bridge-laying units) be reduced. The significance of the troop cuts remains to be seen. The removal of 50,000 men in six divisions of highly combat-ready tanks — as opposed to other categories of force-ready units — would be an important step.

Nevertheless, restructuring forces so that they are observably defensive is difficult even if the political will to do so exists. Offensive potential is bound to remain in any force deployment that is acceptable to the Soviet military — which is responsible for restructuring the forces. Moreover, restructuring takes time. The West will probably have to live with ambiguities concerning Soviet military capabilities and intentions for a while to come.

## Economic Pressures

Whatever the structure of Soviet forces, they are likely to be smaller. While it is tempting to attribute this to the logic of the new security policy, there are other reasons why the five-million man army will be reduced. The economic costs of maintaining huge forces overseas are increasingly intolerable for the Soviet Union. Not only is it expensive to maintain troops abroad, but there are opportunity-costs to the

16 In spite of this, influential Soviet military figures continue to stress the *already* defensive character of Warsaw Pact doctrine. See M.A. Gareyev, "Voennaia doktrina organizatsii Varshavskogo Dogovora," reported in *Voennyi vestnik* July 1988.

17 The importance of active defense is noted in an article by A.N. Bazhenov, "Puti povysheniiia ustroichivosti operativnoi oborony," in *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, May 1987.

18 Conversations with the Regimental Commander of the Chinese People's Army, Zhao Zhong Huan in Harbin, China (June, 1988).

national economy in tying up skilled labor in military units. The practice of deploying very large, undermanned and badly armed forces in remote areas of the Soviet Far East and in Mongolia is expensive and adds little to Soviet military capability.

Additionally, for some time now there has been recognition that quality is as important, if not more so, than quantity on the battlefield. Smaller, more sophisticated forces could improve Soviet military capability; troop reductions and restructuring could make military — as well as economic and political — sense. If indeed the Soviet military has become pessimistic about the rapid conventional offensive and the possibility of launching a surprise attack against NATO, a smaller standing army with the potential to mobilize in a crisis may be a more effective and efficient force posture for the future.

If will probably be a long time before the Soviets develop a blueprint for a smaller standing army, if in fact they ever do. But there is an interesting, nascent discussion of returning to a smaller professional army, supported by a large territorially based militia (the equivalent of the American National Guard). This is just talk at the moment. But it is interesting to note that this was the system that the Soviets employed until 1939. Militia forces were cheap to maintain, and since young men served in their own home areas, they were fully employed in industry. The territorial concept was last raised by Khrushchev in 1960 but never implemented.

The Soviet military and political leadership are in the process of coming to terms with economic, political and social realities. The military may find some of these changes difficult to accept, but there has been little open opposition, and in fact military men have had a major role in shaping the parameters of the proposed changes. Military officers have been very much in evidence at arms control negotiations and the implications of the "new thinking" for security policy are being debated on the pages of the military press. Sometimes, they lose these debates. They fought the concept of unilateral restructuring and reductions and clearly lost on the issue, paving the way for Gorbachev's United Nations Speech. Chief of the General Staff Sergei Akhromeev "retired" on the day of the speech. He may have been unwilling to support the decision or at least reticent about overseeing the unilateral restructuring of Soviet forces, suggesting that he was unwilling to support the decision.

But it is important to recognize that the Soviet system works precisely in that way. There have been eleven Chiefs of the General Staff since World War II. They are fired or

resign fairly frequently. When there is a conflict between military advice and political will, the politicians can and do overrule their professional officers.

## Military Politics

In that vein, under Gorbachev there have been some innovations in military decision-making. Leonid Brezhnev relied heavily on the expertise of bureaucrats, including military bureaucrats, for advice. This tended to make decision-making sluggish and to limit policy innovation. In the military sphere, the General Staff enjoyed broad authority in the generation of options. According to the now raging critique of decision-making under Brezhnev, this gave Soviet security policy a narrowly "military-technical" focus.<sup>19</sup> As Gorbachev has tried to redefine Soviet security policy and to place military policy more firmly within its political context, he has sought advice that is broader than the General Staff can give.

This concern has led to a license for wide-ranging debate in academic and civilian circles on issues of military policy. More importantly, the Foreign Ministry (under Eduard Shevardnadze) and the International Department (under Alexander Iakovlev) have created military sections to broaden their expertise in these matters. One Western analyst has made a persuasive argument that some of the flexibility characteristic of Gorbachev's security policy came from loosening the reins of the General Staff on military policy.<sup>20</sup>

Gorbachev is not trying to dismantle the Soviet military. The General Staff and the professional military have continued to play an active, even dominant role, in this debate. The General Secretary is attempting to bring the military into line with current economic and political realities in the Soviet Union. In order to do that he needs — and is apparently getting — the cooperation of his military officers.

The primary concerns of today's officers appear to be pedestrian ones, like the fate of demobilized soldiers and the decreased demand for commissioned officers.<sup>21</sup> To the degree that they discuss broad philosophical concerns about the Soviet military's role in foreign policy, they seek only to remind the political leadership that "political means" are important in international politics but cannot supplant military power. The dominant formulation states that the "new thinking" is made possible by Soviet strength and that the West, driven by militarist impulses, will never rely solely on political means.<sup>22</sup> This, of course, bears strong

19 The divorce between politics and military issues is noted by Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in his speech to the 19th Party Conference. *Vestnik Ministerstva Inostrannikh Del SSSR*, No. 15, August 15, 1988.

20 See Stephen Meyer, "The Sources and Prospects of Gorbachev's New Political Thinking on Security," *International Security*, Fall, 1988.

21 Memories of the chaos that accompanied Khrushchev's unilateral troop cuts at the end of the 1950s are uppermost in the minds of these officers. Ivan Tretiak was very outspoken on this in *Moscow News*, February 20, 1988.

22 Again Ivan Tretiak is probably most representative of this view. *Ibid.*

## The Harriman Institute Forum

resemblance to arguments in the West that strength brings peace.

Some of the echoes of the new thinking, such as discussions in political circles about "common human interests" supplanting class interests and Gorbachev's rhetoric that military force has lost its relevance in international politics, must be troubling for those whose profession is predicated on the viability of the military instrument. The criticism of Brezhnev and even of Stalin, who valued military power so highly, implicates the Soviet military by association. One of the side effects of the peace offensive has been a nascent attack on the system of conscription and some discussion of changing the laws of military service. Currently, all eighteen year-old men are eligible for service. This is a traditional system of conscription in which few exceptions are made. Some have argued that military deferments should be given to students with critical technical skills. On the other hand, suggestions that religious objectors be released from duty has been flatly rejected in the press.<sup>23</sup>

## The Future

Nevertheless, the Soviet military must know that there is a wide gulf between philosophical concepts and the reality of international politics. The success of the new security policy does not depend on how many times the leadership declares it, but on the response of other states and on real events. To date, the military's response is to continue fighting for resources and developing Soviet military power.

Predictions about the future course of Soviet military development are premature. The Soviet military will most certainly become smaller and, for the time being, less in evidence as the backbone of Soviet foreign policy. The final outcome of *perestroika* in the military is unclear. Arguably, given the myriad of ideas now floating in the Soviet civilian

and military press, the Soviet military is, itself, unsure of where it is going.

These are not good times for the Soviet armed forces. The military leadership is facing a political elite that for political as well as economic reasons seeks to devalue power. Yet any prediction of a precipitous move against the political leadership because of dissatisfaction with the course of the new thinking is premature at best. Barring wide-scale social and political instability, the Soviet military's political role is circumscribed by historical and cultural norms, as well as by coercive sanctions against politically active officers.

Thus, the new security policy seems to be well-ensconced in Soviet political thinking. Changes are beginning to take place in the military sphere as well. Nothing is irreversible, and the new security policy could be erased with a change in leadership or with a change in the perception of Gorbachev, but on balance the new security policy is very smart.

The Soviets are admitting that their bellicose and overt exercise of power in the 1970s was a mistake. They now recognize that military power is most potent when it is in the background. Ironically, the world cares about the new security policy and the peace offensive because the Soviet Union has such impressive capabilities for making war. That fact alone makes Soviet attitudes toward international peace and stability more important than those of other states. The biggest challenge for the West is to deal with the subtle and adroit diplomacy of a Soviet leadership which still enjoys the benefits of Brezhnev's military buildup, but which has managed to diminish its liabilities.

*Condoleezza Rice recently joined the staff of the National Security Council in Washington D.C. This essay was written while she was an Associate Professor of Political Science at Stanford University. She is the author of The Soviet Union and the Czechoslovak Army: Uncertain Allegiance (1984).*

*The Harriman Institute Forum* is published monthly by

The W. Averell Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union,  
Columbia University

Editor: Paul Lerner

Assistant Editors: Rachel Denber, Lolly Jewett

Copyright © 1989 by The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York.

All Rights Reserved. Reproduction of any kind without written permission is strictly prohibited.

ISSN Number: 0896-114X.

Subscription information: In the United States or Canada by first class mail: \$30 per year (\$20 per year for personal subscription by personal check). Outside the United States and Canada by airmail: \$40 per year (\$30 per year for personal subscription by personal check). Make check or money order payable to Columbia University and send to *Forum*,

The Harriman Institute, Columbia University, 420 West 118th Street, New York NY 10027.

Back issues available, at \$2 apiece, for issues beginning with Volume I, Number 5.

Bulk orders available by request.

23 See the discussion in *Izvestia*, August 4, 1987.